

Characterization of H5N1 highly pathogenic avian influenza virus strains isolated from migratory waterfowl in Mongolia on the way back from the southern Asia to their northern territory

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ABSTRACT

H5N1 highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) viruses were isolated from dead wild waterfowl at Khunt, Erkhel, Doityn Tsagaan, Doroo, and Ganga Lakes in Mongolia in July 2005, May 2006, May 2009, July 2009, and May 2010, respectively. The isolates in 2005 and 2006 were classified into genetic clade 2.2, and those in 2009 and 2010 into clade 2.3.2. A/whooper swan/Mongolia/6/2009 (H5N1) experimentally infected ducks and replicated systemically with higher mortality than that of the isolates in 2005 and 2006. Intensive surveillance of avian influenza in migratory waterfowl flying from their nesting lakes in Siberia to Mongolia in every autumn indicate that HPAI viruses have not perpetuated at their nesting lakes until 2009. The present results demonstrate that wild waterfowl were sporadically infected with H5N1 HPAI viruses prevailing in domestic poultry in the southern Asia and died in Mongolia on the way back to their northern territory in spring.

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Introduction

H5N1 highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) virus infections have spread in poultry in more than 60 countries in Eurasia and Africa since 1996, when the first outbreak occurred at a goose farm in Guangdong province in China (Smith et al., 2006; Xu et al., 1999). H5N1 virus infections have become endemic at poultry farms in some countries and cause accidental transmissions to humans, so H5N1 viruses are recognized as the most likely candidate for the next pandemic (Li et al., 2004; Peiris et al., 2007). The widespread presence of H5N1 HPAI viruses in poultry, especially in domestic ducks reared in free range, has inevitably resulted in the transmission of viruses to wild bird populations. Domestic ducks and geese infected with HPAI virus shed progeny viruses in feces at the ponds in the farms, where migratory waterfowl visit. Thus, water-borne transmission easily occurs from domestic waterfowl to migratory waterfowl. In the past, such infections had been restricted to wild birds found dead in the

vicinity of infected poultry farms, but there are concerns that infections of wild birds in which HPAI virus has caused mild or no clinical signs (e.g., ducks) could result in spread of the virus over large areas and long distances (Kim et al., 2009). Infections with HPAI viruses in many wild bird species at 2 waterfowl parks in Hong Kong were recorded in 2002 (Ellis et al., 2004) and further, more significant outbreaks in wild waterfowl were found at Lake Qinghai in Western China (Chen et al., 2005). H5N1 HPAI virus infections in poultry and wild birds now spread in Asia, Europe, and Africa, and it has been suggested that the H5N1 virus could spread by migratory waterfowl to the west and south, since genetically closely related H5N1 viruses (clade 2.2) were isolated in several countries from 2005 to 2006 (Monne et al., 2008; Salzberg et al., 2007; Starick et al., 2008). From intensive surveillance in China, 2 antigenically distinct virus groups, clade 2.3.2 and clade 2.3.4, were characterized as the dominant isolates in wild birds (Kou et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2009).

A natural reservoir of influenza A virus is wild waterfowl (Kida et al., 1980, 1987; Webster et al., 1978). In previous studies, influenza A viruses of different subtypes were isolated from water of the lakes where migratory waterfowl nest in summer, even in autumn when waterfowl had left for the south for migration, suggesting that influenza A viruses are preserved in frozen lake water each year while

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Table 1
Identification of H5N1 isolates in Mongolia.

Date of isolation	Place	Isolates ^a	Amino acid sequence of HA cleavage site ^b	Intravenous pathogenicity index in chicken	Database accession no.
July, 2005	Khunt Lake, Bulgan	Bhg/Mongolia/1/05 (H5N1)	GERRRKKR/G	2.95	AB239300–AB239302, AB233319, AB239303–AB239306
	Erkhel Lake, Khuvsugul	Ws/Mongolia/3/05 (H5N1)	GERRRKKR/G	2.90	AB239307–AB239309, AB233320, AB239310–AB239313
May, 2006	Khunt Lake, Bulgan	Ws/Mongolia/2/06 (H5N1)	GERRRKKR/G	2.71	AB264769–AB264770, AB263751–AB263753, AB265202–AB265204
May, 2009	Erkhel Lake, Khuvsugul Doityn Tsagaan Lake, Arkhangai	Cg/Mongolia/12/06 (H5N1)	GERRRKKR/G	2.80	AB284321–AB284328
		Ws/Mongolia/2/09 (H5N1)	REERRRKR/G	ND ^c	AB517665–AB517666
		Ws/Mongolia/6/09 (H5N1)	REERRRKR/G	2.97	AB520705–AB520712
		Ws/Mongolia/8/09 (H5N1)	REERRRKR/G	ND	AB517667–AB517668
July, 2009	Doroo Lake, Arkhangai	Bhg/Mongolia/X25/09 (H5N1)	REERRRKR/G	ND	AB521999, AB522000
		Bhg/Mongolia/X53/09 (H5N1)	REERRRKR/G	3.00	AB523764–AB523771
		Bhg/Mongolia/X54/09 (H5N1)	REERRRKR/G	ND	AB523366, AB523367
		Rs/Mongolia/X42/09 (H5N1)	REERRRKR/G	ND	AB523756–AB523763
		Rs/Mongolia/X63/09 (H5N1)	REERRRKR/G	ND	AB523368, AB523369
		Cg/Mongolia/X59/09 (H5N1)	REERRRKR/G	ND	AB522001, AB522002
		Cg/Mongolia/X60/09 (H5N1)	REERRRKR/G	ND	AB523772–AB523779
		Ws/Mongolia/1/10 (H5N1)	REERRRKR/G	3.00	AB569345–AB569352
May, 2010	Ganga Lake, Sukhbaatar	Ws/Mongolia/7/10 (H5N1)	REERRRKR/G	ND	AB569353, AB569354
		Ws/Mongolia/11/10 (H5N1)	REERRRKR/G	ND	AB569607, AB569608
		Ws/Mongolia/21/10 (H5N1)	REERRRKR/G	ND	AB569609, AB569610

^a Abbreviated name of birds of each isolate: Bhg: bar-headed goose, Ws: whooper swan, Cg: common goldeneye, Rs: ruddy shelduck.

^b A pair of dibasic amino acid residues was underlined.

^c ND: not determined.

the waterfowl are absent (Ito et al., 1995; Okazaki et al., 2000). To monitor whether these HPAI viruses perpetuate in nature, virological surveillance of avian influenza has been carried out in the lakes in Mongolia where ducks congregate on their migration path from Siberia to the south since 2001.

In July 2005, May 2006, May 2009, July 2009, and May 2010, H5N1 HPAI viruses were isolated from whooper swans and other migratory waterfowl in Mongolia on the way back to their northern territory, although no outbreak was so far reported in poultry in Mongolia. In the present study, influenza A viruses isolated from dead waterfowl and fecal samples in the intensive surveillance of avian influenza in Mongolia were antigenically and genetically characterized. Pathogenicity of the isolated H5N1 viruses in chickens, pigs, and domestic ducks were investigated by experimental infection studies. The present results strongly support the notion that the global surveillance is essential to understand the ecology of influenza viruses for the control of influenza virus infection in birds and mammals.

Results

Isolation and identification of H5N1 HPAI viruses from dead waterfowl

Virus isolation was carried out for tissue samples of dead waterfowl, a bar-headed goose, whooper swan, common goldeneye, and ruddy shelduck, which were found at Khunt, Erkhel, Doityn Tsagaan, Doroo, and Ganga Lakes in 2005, 2006, 2009, and 2010 (Table 1). In July 2005, H5N1 viruses were isolated from tissue homogenates and swab samples of a bar-headed goose and a whooper swan in Khunt and Erkhel Lakes. Similarly, H5N1 viruses were isolated from a whooper swan and a common goldeneye in May 2006 in Khunt and Erkhel Lakes. In May 2009, H5N1 viruses were isolated from 3 whooper swans in Doityn Tsagaan Lake. In late July 2009, H5N1 viruses were also isolated from dead wild birds, 3 bar-headed geese, 2 ruddy shelducks, and 2 common goldeneyes in Doroo Lake. In May 2010, H5N1 viruses were isolated from 4 whooper swans in Ganga Lake. From sequence analysis of the cleavage site of the hemagglutinin (HA), the C-terminus of HA1 had a pair of dibasic amino acid residues, which is a characteristic of HPAI viruses according to the manual of World Organization for Animal Health (OIE, 2009a). Furthermore, representative isolates of each year

were highly pathogenic in chickens on intravenous inoculation and IVPIs of each isolate ranged from 2.71 to 3.00 (Table 1). Complete sequences of the HA, neuraminidase (NA), and other segments were deposited in the GenBank/EMBL/DBJ as accession numbers described in Table 1.

Phylogenetic analysis of H5N1 isolates

The HA genes of H5N1 isolates were analyzed by the neighbor-joining method along with those of other H5 strains containing HPAI viruses recently isolated in the world (Fig. 1). The HA genes of the isolates in 2005 and 2006 were classified into clade 2.2, as Qinghai Lake-type viruses. Isolates from the same year, A/bar-headed goose/Mongolia/1/2005 and A/whooper swan/Mongolia/3/2005 (Ws/Mongolia/3/05), A/whooper swan/Mongolia/2/2006 (Ws/Mongolia/2/06) and A/common goldeneye/Mongolia/12/2006, were closely related and showed the highest homology. The 3 isolates in May 2009, 7 isolates in July 2009, and 4 isolates in May 2010 were classified into clade 2.3.2, the prototype of this clade was isolates from Hong Kong, China, and Vietnam in 2005. A/whooper swan/Mongolia/6/2009 (Ws/Mongolia/6/09) and other 13 isolates were closely related, having high homology with previous isolates from wild birds and chickens in Russia, China, Laos, and Japan.

Pathogenicity of H5N1 influenza viruses in pigs

To assess the pathogenicity of H5N1 isolates in pigs, each of Ws/Mongolia/3/05, Ws/Mongolia/2/06, and Ws/Mongolia/6/09 was inoculated intranasally at $10^{8.0}$ EID₅₀ into two 4-week-old SPF pigs. Viruses were recovered from nasal swabs of all pigs infected with each H5N1 virus although apparent clinical signs were not observed in pigs for the 14 days study (Table 2). The periods of virus shedding in the pigs infected with Ws/Mongolia/2/06 were longer than in the pigs infected with Ws/Mongolia/3/05 or Ws/Mongolia/6/09.

Pathogenicity of H5N1 influenza viruses in ducks

To assess the pathogenicity of H5N1 isolates in ducks, each of Ws/Mongolia/3/05, Ws/Mongolia/2/06, and Ws/Mongolia/6/09 was

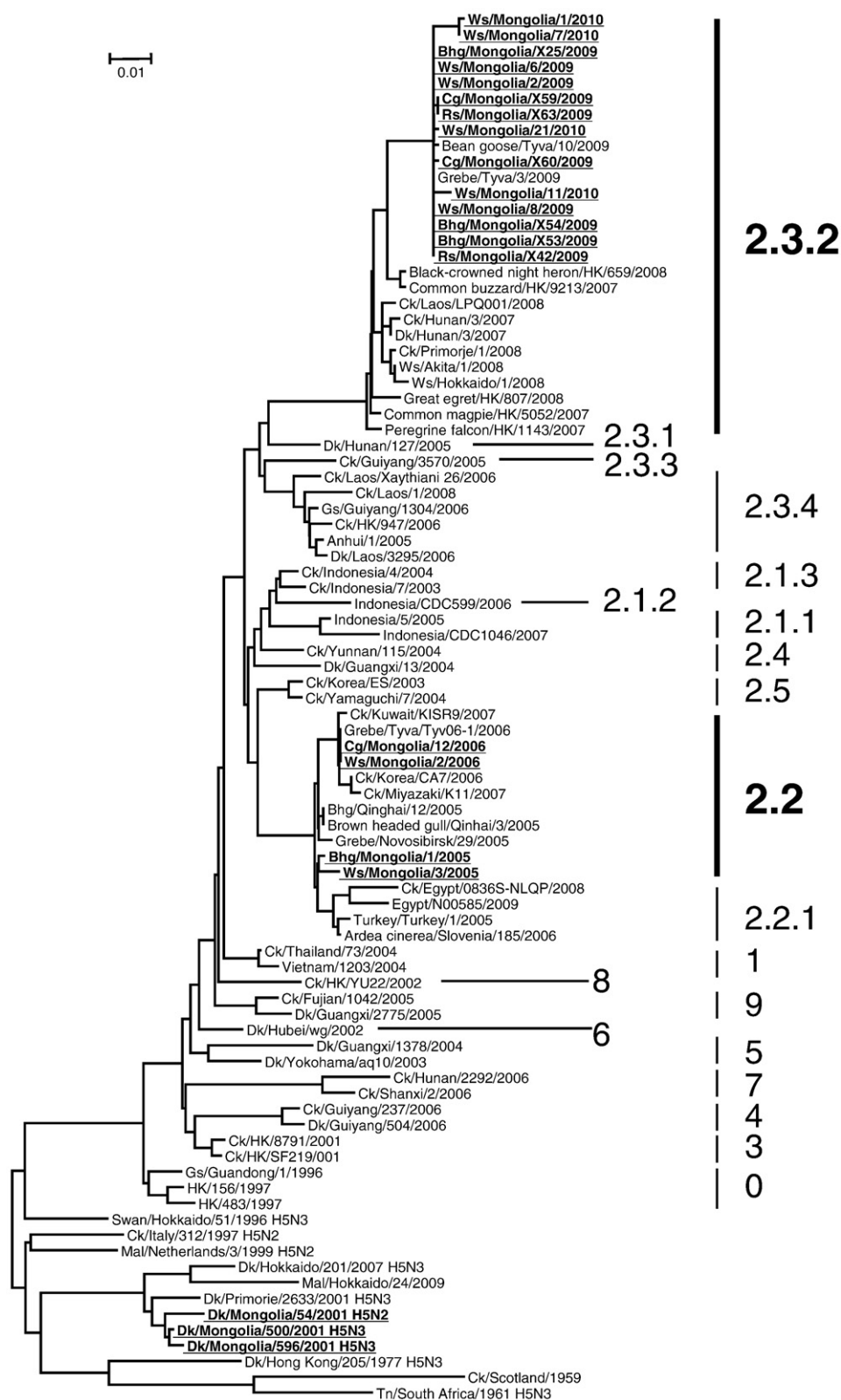


Fig. 1. Phylogenetic trees of the HA genes of H5 influenza viruses. Nucleotide sequences (976 bp) of the HA genes of H5 avian influenza viruses isolated in Mongolia (shown in bold and underlined) and the sequence information of other related viruses were cited from the public database for phylogenetic analysis. The sequence data of Dk/Mongolia/54/01 (H5N2), Dk/Mongolia/500/01 (H5N3), and Dk/Mongolia/596/01 (H5N3) were determined in our previous study (Soda et al., 2008). Horizontal distances are proportional to the minimum number of nucleotide differences required to join nodes and sequences. Genetic classification (clades 0 to 9) was indicated for recent H5N1 HPAI viruses. HA and NA subtypes were eliminated for the names of H5N1 viruses. Abbreviations: Bhg (bar-headed goose), Ws (whooper swan), Cg (common goldeneye), Rs (ruddy shelduck), Ck (chicken), Dk (duck), Gs (goose), Mal (mallard), Tn (tern), and HK (Hong Kong).

Table 2

Experimental infection of H5N1 HPAI viruses in 4-week-old SPF pigs and virus recovery from nasal swabs.

Inoculated viruses	Virus titers on the dpi (log EID ₅₀ /ml)							
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Ws/Mongolia/3/05 (H5N1)	– ^a	3.3	3.8	2.0	2.6	3.8	2.6	–
	–	3.3	4.3	2.8	–	–	–	–
Ws/Mongolia/2/06 (H5N1)	–	0.8	2.8	3.0	3.3	4.5	5.0	3.8
	–	–	1.8	2.0	4.3	4.3	4.5	3.3
Ws/Mongolia/6/09 (H5N1)	–	3.5	2.8	–	≤1.3	1.5	–	–
	–	4.3	2.8	–	–	–	–	–

^a –: <0.5 log EID₅₀/ml.

intranasally inoculated at 10^{8.0} EID₅₀ into six 4-week-old ducks (Table 3). Viruses were recovered from each of the tested samples of the ducks euthanized on 3 days post-inoculation (dpi). The titers of tissue samples from ducks infected with Ws/Mongolia/6/09 were relatively higher than those with Ws/Mongolia/3/05 or Ws/Mongolia/3/06. Three ducks of each group were kept for 14 days to observe the clinical signs of infected ducks. One of the 3 ducks infected with Ws/Mongolia/3/05 died on 9 dpi. Viruses were recovered only from the brain homogenate of this duck. Several neurological signs, such as depression, blindness, and intermittent head-shaking, were observed from 5 dpi onward in all ducks infected with Ws/Mongolia/3/05, and two recovered and survived on 14 dpi. For ducks infected with Ws/Mongolia/2/06, all three ducks survived during the experiment without showing any typical clinical signs. In contrast to the isolates in 2005 and 2006, the ducks infected with Ws/Mongolia/6/09 died earlier, on 4, 5, and 8 dpi, and showed depression and intermittent head-shaking before their death. Viruses were recovered from each of the tested tissues of dead ducks. Notably, the titers of tissue samples from 2 ducks that died on 4 and 5 dpi were clearly higher (10^{7.5}–10^{9.5} EID₅₀/g) than those of the others.

Identification of avian influenza virus isolates from fecal samples of wild waterfowl

Since 2001 we have conducted surveillance studies on avian influenza in wild waterfowl in autumn at several lakes in Mongolia, including Khunt, Erkhel, Doityn Tsagaan, and Doroo Lakes, where migrating waterfowl congregate and H5N1 HPAI viruses were isolated from dead carcasses in 2005, 2006, and 2009. By 2009, 6,211 fecal samples of waterfowl had been collected and inoculated into chicken embryos. As a result, 338 avian influenza viruses of 10 different HA subtypes (H1, H2, H3, H4, H5, H7, H8, H9, H10, H12) were isolated, as shown in Table 4. A/duck/Mongolia/54/2001 (H5N2), A/duck/Mongolia/500/2001 (H5N3), and A/duck/Mongolia/596/2001 (H5N3) (underlined in Table 4) were isolated as H5 viruses in 2001.

From sequence data of these isolates obtained previously (Soda et al., 2008), it was clear that the cleavage site of the HA of these H5 viruses had a low pathogenic profile without a pair of dibasic amino acid residues and these H5 viruses were genetically different from H5N1 HPAI virus isolates in Mongolia in phylogenetic analysis (Fig. 1). The results indicate that H5N1 HPAI viruses have not so far perpetuated at their nesting lakes in Siberia until 2009, since H5N1 HPAI viruses were isolated from migratory waterfowl only on their way back to their northern territory, not from those flying south from Siberia in autumn.

Discussion

Since 2005, numerous cases of H5N1 HPAI virus infection in wild birds have been found in Eurasian and African countries. The viruses of clades 2.2 and 2.2.1 are still epidemic in Asian and African countries in poultry and wild birds (WHO/OIE/FAO H5N1 Evolution Working Group, 2009). This suggests that H5N1 viruses prevailing in domestic birds have transmitted to wild migratory waterfowl by water-borne transmission repeatedly and it was a concern that these H5N1 viruses may perpetuate among migratory waterfowl and in their nesting lake water in nature. In Mongolia, H5N1 viruses of clade 2.2 were isolated from waterfowl spontaneously in 2005 and 2006 after the infections in Qinghai Lake, China. In May and July 2009, H5N1 viruses of clade 2.3.2 were isolated from whooper swans, bar-headed goose, common goldeneye, and ruddy shelduck at Doityn Tsagaan and Doroo Lakes. Furthermore, H5N1 viruses of clade 2.3.2 were isolated again from whooper swans at Ganga Lake in May 2010. H5N1 viruses of clade 2.3.2 were first identified from ducks, geese and other mammals in China and Vietnam in 2005 (Chen et al., 2006; Robertson et al., 2006). In addition, H5N1 viruses of clades 2.3.2 and 2.3.4 were isolated from wild birds in Hong Kong (Ellis et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2009). H5N1 viruses of clade 2.3.2 were also isolated in Japan, Korea, and Russia in 2008 from whooper swan (LVov et al., 2008; Uchida et al., 2008). In the present study, genetic analyses indicate that H5N1 isolates in Mongolia in 2009 and 2010 were closely related with those in Russia, China, Laos, and Japan. In particular, the homologies of nucleotides of each segment between Ws/Mongolia/6/09 and A/grebe/Tyva/3/2009 (H5N1), which was isolated in Russia (accession No. GQ386142–GQ386149), ranged from 99.8% to 99.9%. It is clear that these waterfowl were infected with the same H5N1 viruses in southern areas and flew north since the place and date of outbreaks were closely related according to information from the OIE (2009b). In addition, waterfowl were infected again with the similar H5N1 viruses of clade 2.3.2 in southern areas and fled to the north in 2010. H5N1 viruses isolated from wild birds in Hong Kong in 2007 and 2008 also showed high homology with H5N1 isolates in Mongolia in 2009 and 2010, suggesting that the origin of these viruses was H5N1 viruses prevailing in domestic poultry in China, and those progeny viruses must have transmitted to wild migratory waterfowl by water-borne transmission every year.

Table 3

Experimental infection of H5N1 HPAI viruses in 4-week-old domestic ducks and virus recovery from organs.

Inoculated viruses	No. of ducks	dpi (Health status)	Virus titers of organs (log EID ₅₀ /g)				
			Brain	Trachea	Lungs	Kidneys	Colon
Ws/Mongolia/3/05 (H5N1)	3	3 (sacrificed)	4.5, 5.3, 6.3	4.0, 5.5, 6.3	4.0, 5.5, 6.3	5.8, 6.3, 6.5	4.3, 4.6, 4.8
	1 ^a	9 (dead)	3.3	– ^b	–	–	–
	2 ^a	14 (sacrificed)	–	–	–	–	–
Ws/Mongolia/2/06 (H5N1)	3	3 (sacrificed)	2.3, 3.8, 3.8	4.0, 4.3, 4.3	4.0, 4.3, 4.3	3.5, 4.3, 5.0	3.5, 4.0, 4.0
	3 ^c	14 (sacrificed)	–	–	–	–	–
Ws/Mongolia/6/09 (H5N1)	3	3 (sacrificed)	4.3, 7.3, 7.3	5.7, 6.8, 8.5	6.5, 6.8, 7.8	6.0, 7.5, 8.3	4.8, 5.8, 7.6
	1 ^a	4 (dead)	9.5	9.3	8.5	8.5	8.5
	1 ^a	5 (dead)	8.3	7.5	9.5	8.3	8.3
	1 ^a	8 (dead)	3.8	5.5	4.5	3.0	3.5

^a Each duck showed depression, blindness, and head-shaking.

^b <1.5 log EID₅₀/g.

^c One of the three ducks showed depression and blindness at 5–8 dpi and survived for 14 days.

Table 4
Isolation of avian influenza viruses from fecal samples of migratory waterfowl in Mongolia.

Sampling date	Name of lakes	Isolated viruses/Total samples	Subtypes of viruses ^a (No. of isolates)
Sep., 2001	Ugii, Doityn tsagaan,	37/725	H1N1 (1), H3N2 (1), H3N6 (3), H3N8 (11), H4N2 (1), H4N6 (12), H5N2 (1), H5N3 (2), H7N1 (1), H10N3 (4)
Sep., 2002	Erkhel, Ugii	109/959	H1N1 (3), H3N3 (2), H3N6 (20), H3N8 (53), H4N6 (12), H4N7 (1), H4N8 (1), H7N1 (1), H7N7 (9), H8N4 (5), H10N7 (1), H12N5 (1)
Sep., 2003	Ugii,	68/750	H1N1 (1), H2N3 (1), H3N6 (6), H3N8 (28), H4N2 (1), H4N6 (25), H9N2 (1), H10N5 (5)
Sep., 2005	Ugii,	32/476	H3N2 (1), H3N6 (2), H3N8 (10), H4N6 (6), H8N4 (1), H10N3 (11), H10N7 (5)
Aug., 2006	Khunt, Ugii, Borgin, Shorvog, Baga Tsaisam, Duut, Ikh Tsaidam, Doityn tsagaan	18/545	H2N2 (1), H3N8 (8), H4N6 (9)
Aug., 2007	Khunt, Ugii, Dunt, Ikh Tsaidam, Doityn tsagaan	20/943	H3N8 (14), H4N3(1), H7N6 (1), H7N7 (4)
Aug., 2008	Khunt, Ugii, Dunt, Ikh Tsaidam, Doityn tsagaan	40/792	H3N6 (3), H3N8 (23), H4N6 (8), H4N8 (3), H7N9 (3)
Aug., 2009	Ugii, Doityn tsagaan, Khunt Doroo, Sharga	9/1021	H1N8 (1), H3N8 (2), H4N6 (3), H8N4 (3)

^a H5 isolates, A/duck/Mongolia/54/2001 (H5N2), A/duck/Mongolia/500/2001 (H5N3), and A/duck/Mongolia/596/2001 (H5N3), were underlined.

All cases of H5N virus infection in 2005, 2006, 2009, and 2010 were in May and July, when wild waterfowl migrate from the southern Asia to their nesting lakes in Siberia. In addition, H5N1 viruses genetically related to the isolates in Mongolia were prevailing in domestic poultry in the southern Asia, although no outbreak of HPAI was so far reported in poultry in Mongolia. Furthermore, the results of intensive surveillance of avian influenza in migratory waterfowl flying from their nesting lakes in Siberia to Mongolia in every autumn indicate that no HPAI virus has been isolated from wild waterfowl flying from their nesting lakes until 2009. These results demonstrate that wild waterfowl were sporadically infected with H5N1 HPAI viruses prevailing in domestic poultry in the southern Asia and died in Mongolia on the way back to their northern territory in spring and no HPAI virus has perpetuated at their nesting lakes in Siberia until 2009. To reduce the risk of the perpetuation of HPAI viruses among migratory waterfowl at their nesting lakes in Siberia, HPAI viruses should be contained within poultry in the southern Asia by a stamping-out strategy, the basic control measure of HPAI.

It was proposed that the expression of sialic acid receptors for human and avian influenza viruses on epithelial cells of the trachea renders pigs susceptible to infection with both types of influenza viruses (Ito et al., 1998). From the previous experience of pandemic influenza, pigs play an important role as a “mixing vessels” to generate pandemic influenza virus as a genetic reassortant between avian and human influenza viruses (Kida et al., 1988, 1994). In this experiment, all 3 H5N1 viruses replicated in pigs, but the titers of nasal swabs and the period of virus shedding were lower than the infections with swine influenza viruses (Bai et al., 2005). Although the susceptibility of domestic pigs to H5N1 avian influenza viruses is not high (Isoda et al., 2006; Lipatov et al., 2008), natural pig-to-pig infections with H5N1 avian influenza viruses have been found (Choi et al., 2005; Takano et al., 2009). A surveillance study of influenza virus infection in pigs should be promoted to assess the prevalence of H5N1 viruses in pigs and the pathogenicity of these isolates in mammals and birds for future pandemics in humans.

Originally, non-pathogenic avian influenza viruses isolated from migratory waterfowl replicated only in columnar epithelial cells, forming crypts in the large intestine, and were excreted in the fecal materials (Kida et al., 1980; Webster et al., 1978). In the case of H5N1 HPAI viruses, recent isolates acquired lethal pathogenicity in waterfowl, although previous H5N1 isolates also replicated systemically and did not show lethal clinical signs in ducks (Chen et al., 2004; Hulse-Post et al., 2005; Kim et al., 2008; Pantin-Jackwood et al., 2007; Sturm-Ramirez et al., 2005). In the present study, we examined the pathogenicity of Ws/Mongolia/3/05 (clade 2.2), Ws/Mongolia/2/06 (clade 2.2), and Ws/Mongolia/6/09 (clade 2.3.2) of H5N1 viruses in domestic ducks. To assess the pathogenicity of avian influenza in ducks, the age and strain of ducks, infectivity titers of the inocula, and

the route of inoculation influence the results (Keawcharoen et al., 2008; Kim et al., 2008; Pantin-Jackwood et al., 2007). In our studies, including previous experiments (Kishida et al., 2005), H5 avian influenza viruses of $10^{8.0}$ EID₅₀ were inoculated intranasally into 4-week-old domestic ducks of Chelly Valley strain. It is noted that systemic replication with low mortality of Ws/Mongolia/3/05 and Ws/Mongolia/2/06, and high mortality of Ws/Mongolia/6/09 was observed as compared with previous reports (Brown et al., 2006; Kishida et al., 2005; Pfeiffer et al., 2009). The present results support that H5N1 influenza viruses have evolved to cause lethal infection in ducks since multiple infections of domestic ducks and wild birds with these viruses have continued in epidemic areas. Further investigation on the H5N1 virus infections in wild birds is needed in addition to the recent studies (Hulse-Post et al., 2007; Reed et al., 2010) since they are not sufficient to understand on the molecular basis of the pathogenicity of these H5N1 isolates in ducks.

In conclusion, H5N1 HPAI viruses were isolated from migratory waterfowl only on their way back to their northern territory, and not from those flying to the south from Siberia in autumn, suggesting that H5N1 HPAI viruses have not perpetuated at their nesting lakes in Siberia until 2009. For the control of influenza virus infection in birds and mammals, the global surveillance to understand the ecology of influenza viruses and stamping out policy to contain the HPAI viruses in the domestic poultry are essential.

Materials and methods

Isolation and identification of viruses

Virus isolation was carried out from the homogenate of the brain, lungs, spleen of bar-headed goose (*Anser indicus*), whooper swan (*Cygnus cygnus*), common goldeneye (*Bucephala clangula*), and ruddy shelduck (*Tadorna ferruginea*), which were found as carcasses in the Khunt, Erkhel, Doityn Tsagaan, Doroo, and Ganga Lakes, Mongolia in July 2005, May 2006, May 2009, July 2009, and May 2010 (Table 1). Ten percent organ homogenates were inoculated into the allantoic cavities of 10-day-old chicken embryos. Subtypes of influenza virus isolates were identified by hemagglutination-inhibition (HI) and neuraminidase-inhibition (NI) tests using antisera to the reference strains of influenza viruses (Kida and Yanagawa, 1979).

A total of 6,211 fecal samples was collected from waterfowl in 2001–2009 in Mongolia. Each sample was mixed with minimum essential medium (MEM) containing antibiotics and inoculated into the allantoic cavities of 10-day-old chicken embryos. Subtypes of influenza virus isolates were identified by HI and NI tests as described above.

Sequencing and phylogenetic analysis

Viral RNA was extracted from the allantoic fluid of chicken embryos infected with viruses by TRIzol LS Reagent (Invitrogen) and reverse-transcribed with the Uni12 primer (Hoffmann et al., 2001) and M-MLV Reverse Transcriptase (Invitrogen). The full-length genome of each gene segment was amplified by polymerase chain reaction with gene-specific primer sets (Hoffmann et al., 2001). Direct sequencing of each gene segment was performed using an auto sequencer, CEQ 2000XL (Beckman Coulter). The nucleotide sequences of H5 isolates obtained in the present study have been registered in GenBank/EMBL/DDBJ, as shown in Table 1.

To assess genetic relationship among H5 influenza virus strains, the sequence of 976 bp of the HA gene of each isolate was compared with those of H5 viruses from our previous study (Soda et al., 2008) and the public database. Phylogenetic tree was constructed by the neighbor-joining method (Saitou and Nei, 1987).

Experimental infection of chickens, pigs, and domestic ducks with H5N1 isolates

To assess the pathogenicity of H5N1 isolates, each virus was inoculated into chickens (*Gallus gallus*), pigs (*Sus scrofa domestica*), and domestic ducks (*Anas platyrhynchos* var. *domesticus*), respectively. For the intravenous pathogenicity index (IVPI) test, 0.1 ml of 1:10 dilutions of infectious allantoic fluids were inoculated intravenously into ten 6- or 7-week-old chickens (Boris brown, Japan). The IVPI was calculated according to the standard protocol (OIE, 2009a).

For the pathogenicity test in pigs, 1 ml of each H5N1 isolate containing $10^{8.0}$ EID₅₀ was inoculated intranasally into two 4-week-old specific pathogen-free pigs (Sankyo Lab Service, Japan) and nasal swabs of each pig were collected daily in 2 ml MEM containing antibiotics from 1 to 7 dpi for virus recovery.

For the pathogenicity test in ducks, 0.1 ml of each H5N1 isolate containing $10^{8.0}$ EID₅₀ was inoculated intranasally into six 4-week-old ducks (Chelly Valley, Japan). Three of the ducks were euthanized on 3 dpi and the brain, trachea, lungs, kidneys and colon were collected aseptically for virus recovery. The remaining 3 ducks were observed clinically for 14 days after inoculation. On the death of ducks, their tissues were collected for virus recovery. The sera and organs were collected from survived ducks for antibody response and virus recovery. Swab samples of pigs and tissue homogenates from ducks were inoculated into 10-day-old embryonated chicken eggs and virus titers were calculated and expressed as the EID₅₀ per ml (swab) or gram (tissue). For the evaluation of immune response, specific antibodies were detected by hemagglutination-inhibition test in 0.025 ml of collected duck sera according to the standard protocol (OIE, 2009a).

Each animal was housed in a self-contained isolator unit (Tokiwa Kagaku, Japan) at a BSL-3 facility at the Graduate School of Veterinary Medicine, Hokkaido University, Japan.

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